

ORM and the Trash Bin

By AMS1 Michael Galski
VR-58

When I teach operational risk management, I usually ask my class to analyze a simple task—such as taking out the trash—for the risks involved. The group often gives lighthearted responses that range from the possibility of suffering a paper cut to being abducted by aliens. I never thought that I would be doing a risk assessment about taking out trash for real.

One day last August, I had just finished lunch and was heading for the smoke pit, which was at the end of our hangar, when I smelled burning plastic. Rounding the corner of our supply cage, I noticed smoke near the recycling area and ran toward it to investigate. I found a burning overhead projector inside a cardboard box. My first concern was a tri-wall (a large cardboard container) containing about 30 cubic feet of recyclable paper that was only a few feet away.

I grabbed the box that contained the burning projector and pulled it out of the hangar, away from other combustibles. Then I ran back inside the hangar to get a fire extinguisher. By that time, one of

our Quality Assurance representatives had arrived and had helped me put out the fire. The only damage was to the projector and a printer in the same box. These items had been put there to go to DRMO.

Once the situation was under control, the question of how this fire started remained. Since neither item was plugged in, electrical failure was out of the question. Could it have been a careless smoker? No, the smoke pit was in a screened area more than 30 feet away. Besides, the fire had started in the projector and had worked its way out.

We finally figured out the cause. The sun shining through the lenses of the projection head had started the fire. Any 12-year-old who has ever played with a magnifying glass in the sun knows how much heat the focal point of sunlight can produce. Imagine this heat multiplied by its own intensity. (The projector has two lenses.) The heat must have been tremendous because parts of the glass mirror at the bottom of the projector had melted.

There were more lessons I learned from this experience. Since I had removed the burning object from the hangar, I didn't think it was necessary to activate the fire alarm. That was a wrong decision. There was still the potential of burning embers blowing into the hangar and starting another fire.

Another mistake I made was not contacting the fire department right away. I didn't see a need for them. After all, we had put out the fire with a couple of squirts of a dry-chemical fire extinguisher. However, there is always a potential for re-flash, and fires can quickly get out of control. You must call the fire department for all fires, no matter how small.

The most disturbing thing about this incident was the fact that someone had actually said they smelled smoke before I discovered the fire. No one did any investigating because we all assumed it was coming from the NADEP side of the hangar. Never again will we smell smoke without investigating.

Maybe my students and I should take my "taking-out-the-trash" analogy during ORM training more seriously. After all, who would have guessed that throwing away an overhead projector could have led to a fire with the potential for disaster? ■

Ashore

